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AUTHOR Byers, Peggy Yuhas

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ABSTRACT

This paper urges the use of case study discussions in the organizational communication class as an effective instructional technique. The paper presents a variety of formats for bringing case studies to life for students in the organizational communication course. It first discusses sources for case studies such as the World Wide Web, local and national news publications, local business and industry, and self-developed case studies. Second, methods for facilitating case study discussions are presented. Contains eight references. Appendixes present a "Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition" sample, a "Business Week Online" sample, an "AJR Newslink" sample, and a corporation (Eli Lilly) home page sample. (NKA)

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Case Studies in the Organizational Communication Course: Applying Textbook Concepts to Real Life Organizations

Peggy Yuhas Byers, Ph.D.
Department of Speech Communication
Ball State University
Muncie, IN 47306
765-285-1956
00pybyers@bsu.edu

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Presented at the Central States Communication Association conference. Chicago, IL, April, 1998.

CS 509 862

Abstract

This manuscript presents a variety of formats for bringing case studies to life for students in the organizational communication course. It will first discuss sources for case studies such as local and national news publications, local business and industry, and self-developed case studies. Second, methods for facilitating case study discussions will be presented.

Case Studies in the Organizational Communication Course: Applying Textbook Concepts to Real Life Organizations

As teachers who wish to prepare our students to be effective organizational members, we see the definite need to incorporate as much "real world" discussion and application as possible into the classroom. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this objective. This manuscript will provide some suggestions for achieving this in the organizational communication class through case study discussions. It will first discuss sources for case studies. Second, methods for facilitating discussion will be provided.

Case Study Sources

Case studies can be obtained from a variety of sources. Many case studies can be obtained from the world wide web (WWW), local or national newspapers, trade publications, and news magazines. Student development of hypothetical case studies is also an option. Regardless of the source, all cases should be previewed by the teacher, and then selected based on what the topic of the analysis is, or on what is to be gleaned from the students. An alternative option is for the teacher to assign students, or groups of students to locate cases highlighting specific concepts.

- Newspapers:

Many newspapers can be searched in either paper form or through the WWW. The Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition (See sample from WSJ and additional addresses in Appendix A) highlights small businesses in one of its sections (www.wsj.com for the home page, then click on "small business suite," then click on "small business"). This provides some very

lengthy business profiles which can be used to discuss a variety of issues such as culture, leadership, hierarchy, and systems.

Another good source is the local newspaper. Most papers of medium to large cities will have a "business" section each Sunday, if not daily. These will often profile community ventures, and provide other information on local and national businesses. These can provide some interesting sources for discussion. It is not unusual to find associated press articles on sexual harassment suits, organizations being downsized, and other interesting topics of relevance in the organizational course. One special feature of utilizing a local newspaper is that usually many members of the class are familiar with the organization under discussion, and seem to be interested in discussing it. These also lend themselves nicely to field trips for the students.

- News Magazines

News magazines are another good source for real world case studies which can be obtained in either hard copy or from the WWW. As seen in the sample and additional links in Appendix B, Business Week Online (www.businessweek.com) provides many opportunities for stories which could be used for case studies. In this edition there is an interesting article on the impact of having a male as CEO of Avon. Since the articles change every few days or weeks, there is a steady flow of fresh material to utilize.

- Trade Publications

Many trade publications, which can be accessed in both hard copy as well as occasionally online, provide features on topics, individuals and organizations. For example, The Chronicle of Higher Education (http://chronicle.com) intermittently publishes articles on corporations which can be useful in the organizational communication course. The

March 13, 1998 edition presents a lengthy article on the death of an American factory. This story provides detail and depth on the organization, as well as some of its employees (Winkler, 1998). Another example comes from Training: The Human Side of Enterprise (Stamps, 1998). The January, 1998 edition features a story on Motorola and its learning culture. This case study would be very useful in discussing training, culture, and interpersonal skills.

- World Wide Web

The WWW is another source for case studies. As previously discussed, online versions of newspapers, news magazines and trade publications (See Appendix C for additional links), contain a wide variety of case study information. Additionally, most large organizations have their own home pages which provide information on the corporate mission, recent press releases, information on products, services, financial reports, and a myriad of other useful information (see Appendix D). This information can be assembled to develop a profile and serve as the basis for a variety of discussions about contemporary organizations.

- The Local Community

Most organizations are quite willing to visit classrooms and talk about their organizations. Before inviting a representative from an organization to come to your classroom, however, some homework needs to be done. For example, a topic, or list of topics to be addressed should be developed by the instructor or class. The organization to be contacted should be actively emersed in the topics of discussion. For instance, you would not invite a representative from an organization which just laid off 100 workers to talk about the difficulty in finding good employees, but

you might invite that representative to discuss the difficulty in communicating bad news to employees.

These case study discussions are most effective when the class has been given information regarding the organization prior to the speaker's visit. The class could engage in discussion about their perceptions of the issue under discussion and its impact on the organization prior to the visit. The class could then compare what their perceptions were to what the organization's perceptions were. Also, an agenda should be developed and given to the speaker and class prior to the visit. The agenda should highlight the issue(s) under consideration (eg. communicating bad news) and then follow with a some specific subpoints for discussion (where, when, and how is it best to communicate this?).

Locating representatives from organizations to serve as case study sources is a relatively simple task. The departmental internship supervisor is a useful resource for providing pre-established relationships between the academic institution and organizations in the local community. Any departmental faculty who are actively engaged in training or consulting in the community could be another valuable source of contacts. The local chamber of commerce might also have some suggestions on representatives to contact. Organizations featured in press are another source. The last resort would be cold calling from the local yellow pages. As noted in the discussion of utilizing the local newspaper, this also lends itself well to field trips for the students.

- Student Generated Case Studies

A final option for discussion material is to have students develop their own case studies. This can be done individually or in small working groups. For this to be successful, however, the students need clear

guidance in terms of the concepts to be incorporated into the case which will provide the basis for the discussion. In the lower-level organizational communication courses, this has proven to be the least effective means for generating case studies, however, it does have potential. It is more beneficial in upper level classes with students who possess a true understanding of organizational life. Nontraditional students and students with a rich working background find this exercise to be very enjoyable since they are able to incorporate their own real world examples into the cases.

Facilitating Case Study Discussion

- In the Classroom

Case study discussions can be conducted in a variety of formats. They can be discussed by the class as a whole, in small groups, or in an electronic format. Discussing case studies with the class as a whole seems to work best with a relatively small class size. For example, a class of 30 or more students may have difficulty keeping focused on the case and students may be somewhat reluctant to talk. In cases such as this, perhaps it might be best to first place the students in dyads or small groups and have them discuss the questions or issues related to the case. The groups or dyads may then write down their thoughts which will eventually be shared with the class as a whole in a large group discussion.

Case study discussions are often very successful in the small group discussion, or seminar format. When utilizing small groups (approximately 5-7 per group) for the discussion, students need to understand what they are to do and why. Thus, they will likely become

more involved and gain more knowledge. Kougl (1997) suggests that the facilitator provide the small groups information on the following:

Focus: What is the group's content – topic, issue, or problem. What should be the focus of the case discussion?

Purpose: Why are we going to get into groups to discuss it? What is supposed to happen as a result? What is the expected result or outcome?

Motivation: Generate interest in the assignment by showing how it relates to them personally, or to what has or will go on in class or real life. Answer the question: Why should we care?

Procedures: Explain the definition of the basic elements that you have chosen for the case study discussion such as time frame, group composition, directions, roles, and norms. Explain these as clearly as possible and allow time for questions. Be sure to have the necessary materials and resources they will need such as the organization's profile and the discussion agenda.

During the case study discussion, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator. The primary function is to monitor groups while they work. The teacher remains attentive to what is happening in the groups and is ready to offer supportive guidance where needed; circulate around the room observing and listening. Watch for nonverbal cues of confusion and frustration and then go to that group and offer assistance.

In concluding the case study discussion, the teacher needs to recognize what has been accomplished, tie activities and accomplishments together, and provide closure. Kougl (1997) suggests that the following be accomplished at the end of the case study discussion:

Summary: What have we gained from our experiences as a group? The group may choose to share its results with the rest of the class, or

summarize major insights or ideas from the class. This may be accomplished either by the class as a whole, or in small discussion groups.

Reflective Interpretation: The class discusses what each group's summary means in term of the focus and purpose. What has been learned? What conclusions can be gleaned from the case under discussion?

Connectors: How does this activity relate to what we have done and what we will do? Make the connection between the case study and their learning. This serves as the transition into next segment of the class.

- Online Discussion

Using online discussion groups can be challenging, yet also rewarding. I currently use a class newsgroup on the Internet as a method for discussing case studies. Students are put into small groups and assigned specific cases. Each group is responsible for posting case study discussion questions on the newsgroup. All other students are required to reply to the posted questions. This process is currently in a trial stage. We have experienced difficulty getting into the newsgroup due to the number of people using the server, and the server not allowing additional users to log on. This has been frustrating to many of the students because they need to keep going back to the computer to try to log on. Many of the replies to the case study questions have, however, been very insightful. This medium seems to appeal most to those who are, perhaps, reluctant to speak up in class. There are many, however, who dislike the medium and would rather discuss it face-to-face in the classroom.

There are other online formats for discussion which could also be utilized. For example, communicating online with individuals at organizations, students at other schools engaging in the same type of

activity, and joining online discussion groups on related issues (such as that sponsored by The Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition). Much of the success of this relies on the technological resources available to the students.

In all of the case study sources presented above, the teacher can provide the material to the students and either tell them what to focus on, or direct the students on the topic, and then assign them to find it in the material and brainstorm some ideas. Additionally, the teacher can assign different topics, and have individuals or groups search for a suitable case study. In this case, however, the teacher would need to provide guidelines for the students on finding and evaluating potential cases.

Conclusion

Incorporating case studies into the organizational communication classroom is a creative and interesting way to bridge the textbook information with "real world" experiences. It allows students to see how communication concepts, which are sometimes vague for them, play a vital role in contemporary organizations. Additionally, when students are responsible for locating the case study, the act of searching for the information brings them into contact with important sources of information outside the text book. Having the students regularly visit the Wall Street Journal to look for potential case studies puts them in touch with other current topics in organizations.

The most useful locations for locating case study materials are newspapers, trade publications, the WWW, and news magazines. Student development of hypothetical case studies is also an option. However, it may not work well with lower-level students and those who don't have a rich background of experiences in organizations. In facilitating case study

discussions it is important that the students are given ample prepatory information and that the teacher make the important connections clear for the students.

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WWW.NEWSLINK.ORG. (1998). Americal Journalism Review sponsored page.

WWW.WSJ.COM. (1998). The wall street journal interactive edition.

Appendix A

Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition Sample

Additional Links:

www.mediainfo.com/ephome/npaper/nphtm/online.htm

www.nytimes.com

www.usatoday.com

www.tribune.com/NEWS/APwire.html

www.wsj.com

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Mutual Fund Quarterly: Mutual fund investors reveled in 1997: The a U.S. stock fund returned 24.36%. But pros say investors should low

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Stock Options Reality

from Inc. ONLINE

Stock options have become part of the American dream and the managerial weapon of choice for the savviest companies. But the trouble is, that weapon may threaten the very companies that employ it.

On-Line Stores' Relations

Savvy Web merchants have begun using "affiliate networks," business plans that teams the merchants with a network of Web sites that host links to the store and receive commissions when customers they refer actually make a purchase. For some, the system can be a formula for quick and profitable expansion.

Hawaii Offers Paradise

Digital Island is offering a high-tech alternative to Internet logjams, and some big corporations are signing on to use Hawaii as a gateway to faster on-line service.

Electricity Plays

As California moves to deregulate its $20 billion-a-year electricity market, some 250 marketers have signed up in the hope of making a fortune. But experts estimate that only 20 to 40 newcomers will survive.

DISC

Enter the Suite: A forum for new vis regulars.
Web Decisions
Affiliate Network

RES

A collectior the Web to entrepreneu information, idea and customers.

BUS LOC

Search for name or typ addresses, other information

TEXT

Leave the space bl search to look at r Enterprise and Sm stories. Or enter k narrow the search

search

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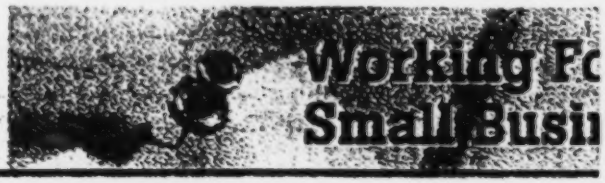

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May 22, 1997

Two Entrepreneurs Discuss Their Approaches to Business

There are about as many different ways to run a small business as there are small-business owners.

Some entrepreneurs run their companies like mini-corporations, complete with policy manuals, dress codes and other big-business trappings -- including a corner office for the boss. Others embrace the mom-and-pop aesthetic: They hire relatives, host company cookouts and often get personally involved in their employees' lives.

No single management style is perfect, and no two entrepreneurs treat employees the same way. But one thing is certain: The look and feel of a small workplace almost always reflect the owners' tastes and philosophies.

To get a better idea of how small-business owners deal with workplace issues, The Wall Street Journal went to Columbus, Ohio, to talk to two small-business owners. Five years ago, Curtis McGuire started Redleg's Lumper Service Inc., a company that loads and unloads freight. Today he employs 45 people. Mr. McGuire doesn't offer his employees health benefits, but as his company grows, he has started to think about ways to retain key employees.

Diane Warren is co-owner of Katzinger's Inc., which operates a 100-seat restaurant and delicatessen. She and her husband, Steve, employ 35 full-time workers. Despite Katzinger's small size, Ms. Warren offers health benefits and cash bonuses to her employees. But she says she constantly worries about rising health-plan costs as the business strives to remain profitable.

Ms. Warren and Mr. McGuire discussed the challenges they face with Stephanie N. Mehta, the Journal's deputy enterprise editor.

Please join our on-line discussion of this topic.

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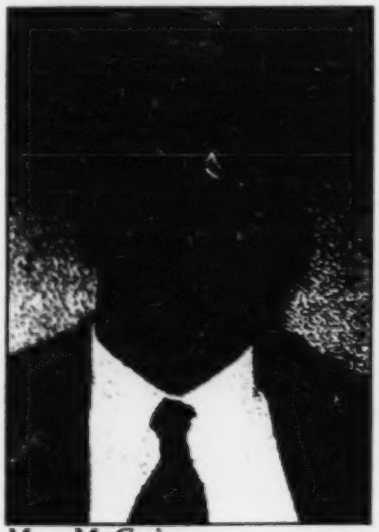
The Wall Street Journal: Maybe we could start off by taking a few minutes to talk a little bit about each of your companies.

Mr. McGuire: I'm Curtis McGuire. I'm the owner of Redleg's Lumper Service Inc.



Mr. McGuire

I know everybody's wondering: What's a "lumper"? It's a West Virginia coal-mining term. When lumps of coal would fall off the side [of a boat], little kids with burlap sacks would come by and pick up the lumps of coal and then stack them together, and they'd get paid per stack.

What my guys do is palletize the freight so the warehouse can store it in their facility. So, if a semi trailer wants to be loaded up to full capacity, and they don't use pallets, they might put it on the floor of the trailer, and my guys would palletize it for the warehouse or the truck company.

We've been in business five years. During that time, I've grown from one employee -- myself -- to 45. The growth of the business has been phenomenal. I have to go out of the county to find employees who like to do hard manual labor.

Ms. Warren: I'm Diane Warren, and my husband and I are co-owners of Katzinger's Delicatessen. We've been in business since 1984. When we opened, we had this little storefront and 17 employees. We have since purchased the building, which tripled our space. We went from 32 seats to about 76. And then last year we bought the house next door, and we got this 800-square-foot addition to our kitchen.

Our staffing goes up and down, and it's a function of a lot of things. Partly it's a function of what's available. Partly it's a function of how many full-time and how many part-time people we have, and partly it's a seasonal thing.

Right now, we have 36 people on our staff, almost all of whom are full time, which is unusual for us but is a blessing because they're experienced and they're well-trained.

Workers' Comp

WSJ: What are the major workplace and labor-related challenges that you face in running a small business?

Mr. McGuire: Well one of the biggest challenges that I have, besides finding the people who actually want to do it, is workers' compensation. I had to get into a workers' compensation pool because Ohio workers' comp was charging me 15% of everything I was paying my guys.

I was getting killed with $40,000 workers' comp bills [a year]. That was my biggest problem, and to this day remains my big problem.

Ms. Warren: Am I allowed to butt in here and ask him questions?

WSJ: Absolutely.

Ms. Warren: When you joined the pool, didn't that bring your rates down considerably?

Mr. McGuire: It did, and I'm going to keep going lower. That $40,000 almost put me out of business.

Ms. Warren: We've had the same thing. We've had almost no claims, and there is, like, a little cut or something, and we have $3,000 in claims and $85,000 in premiums over a three-year period. That's a big problem.

Retaining Employees

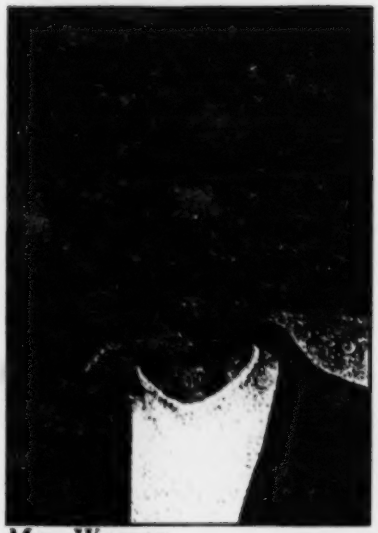
WSJ: What are some of the other challenges you face?

Mr. McGuire: Because there's so much competition here for employees, you have to try and keep the employees. I tried to give my guys [health] insurance, but they had to pay a price, and I actually let them vote and pick the insurance that they were going to get. And they said they didn't want it because it was too expensive.

I can't afford to help them pay that much into it because our cost overhead is so high. So that's another challenge -- competing with other companies for the benefits, because I really can't offer them much of anything. I'm not sure how you do it since I'm such a young business.

Ms. Warren: We do offer health insurance for our employees. When we started in 1984, it was a lot easier to offer health insurance because it was a lot less expensive and we had a smaller staff and we had a young, healthy staff. Some of these people have been with me for a long time; they're not young anymore by insurance standards. My average age for insurance purposes is in the mid-30s. That bumps us up in terms of premium costs.

But I have a personal commitment to offering health insurance for my staff. And so I will do everything that I can to continue to do that.



Ms. Warren

For a long time, we paid the whole premium. I got to a point, for two reasons, where I asked them to chip in on the premiums. One was because it got to be expensive enough that I needed to look at ways to cut back our out-of-pocket expense. But the other thing was because it was becoming viewed as an entitlement, and so they thought that it was free.

People don't understand there's a cost associated with everything that they do. For example, we offer pickles out of a big pickle barrel. Pickles come with the sandwiches, and when I take somebody's order, I say, "There's no additional charge for the pickles." My staff will say, "The pickles are free." The pickles are not free -- you've already paid for it, whether you're having it or not. People think that it's free, so they'll go and take a dozen and they won't eat a dozen -- they'll eat one or maybe two. And then they'll take a handful of ketchup packets and mustard packets because they think they're free.

Well, we had the same thing with the health insurance. These guys were thinking that it was free, that it wasn't a cost to anybody, that it wasn't affecting their ability to get a higher wage, that it wasn't affecting their ability to have other kinds of benefits, that it wasn't affecting Katzinger's ability to give higher contributions to the community. So, I said, "No, no, no, you guys have got to know that it costs something."

So, we asked them to pay 25% of the premium, which for a full-time, single employee is about $22 a month. We can't have a Cadillac policy, because these guys that are making $6, $7, $8 an hour aren't going to be able to pay their premium. We also pay 75% of the premiums for families as well.

So for a family person, it's a pretty good deal. These guys are paying $50 to cover their whole family. They are by and large very appreciative of it, but it will not keep them employed if it's time for them to go. And that's when we had to go and look at other things that would be as meaningful for people within the work environment.

We've always offered food, because that's what we've got. We have a minimum of 20 people on various shifts a day, and we're open seven days a week. And the value of that meal is about $10 a person or about $200 a day, minimum.

Our cost is about a third of that, but if I were selling that food, I'd be getting about $10. So, it's important to me that these guys understand that as well. So they've got to ring it into the register. They have to have a little chit that comes up and says: This is what your employee meal would have cost today were you a customer and had to purchase it. And I think it's important that they understand that. This isn't free.

Appendix B

Business Week Online Sample

Additional Links:

www.fwi.com/wnt/wnt.html

www.usnews.com

www.businessweek.com

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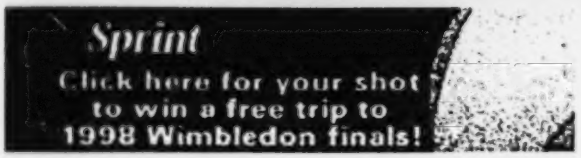

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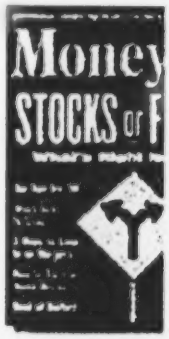

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